SHEEP AND WOOL

One out of every seven sheep in the world is in Australia — only the Soviet Union has more. Early in our history, some far-sighted people realised the importance of wool for the development of Australia. For the first few years of settlement, meat was more important than wool as the Colony needed to feed itself as quickly as possible. Governor Phillip brought 90 Cape Breed sheep (see right) in the First Fleet but not many survived and those that did wandered away soon after the Settlement began.

The real beginning of the sheep industry started with the importation of 26 Spanish Merino by Capt. King from South Africa in 1797. Capt. John Macarthur and Rev. Samuel Marsden bought some of these and started breeding sheep. Both these men are pioneers of our wool industry.
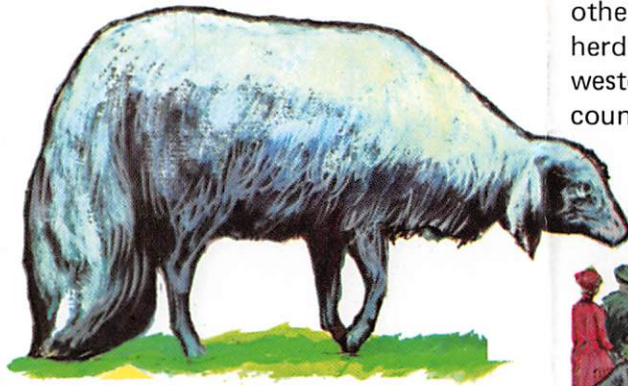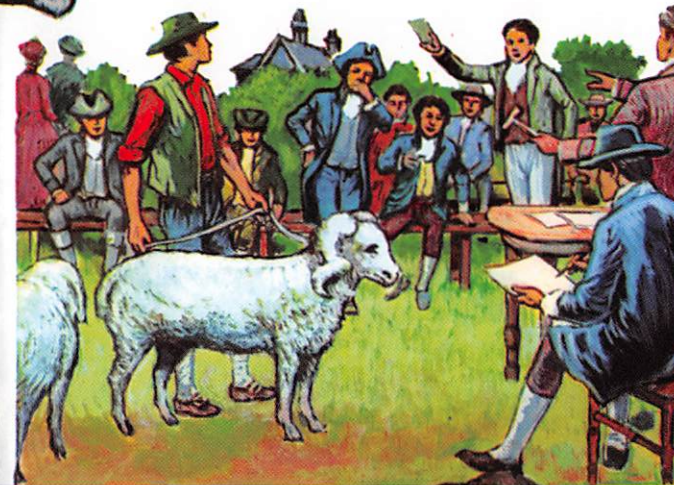

Macarthur (top right) has often been credited as the Father of the Australian wool industry. It is true he did much to awaken interest in England in the potential for Australian wool growing and its export to England. But his wife, Elizabeth played a large part

also, as she operated his business for the many years he was away. Others such as Marsden also played a part in developing the merino to Australian conditions.

In Europe, the Napoleonic Wars were preventing supplies of wool reaching the English mills, so this encouraged wool production in Australia. With free convict labour and the wide open spaces opened up once the Mountains were crossed, the cost of producing wool was very low, in spite of the long sea journey to the markets of England. By 1819, 21 landowners had more than 1,000 sheep each and over 100 others had smaller flocks. One shepherd handled about 300 sheep and the western plains proved ideal for sheep country as they are today.
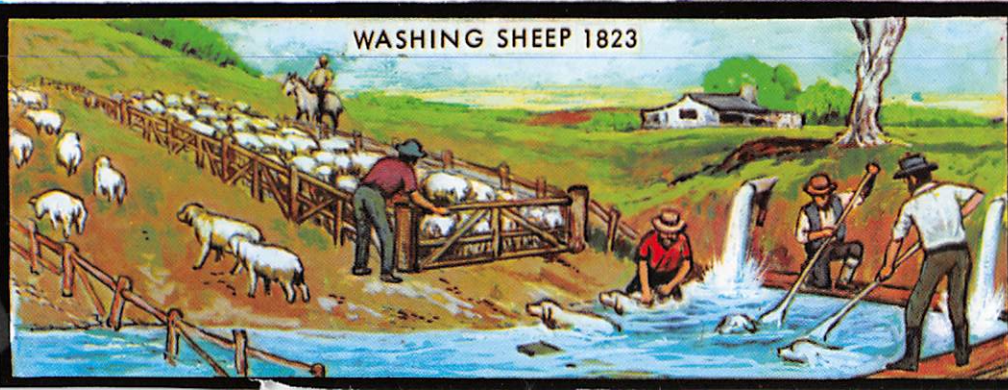

Left: Macarthur buying 8 Merinos at auction from the King's own stud at Kew, England in 1804. They cost him £130 but only 5 survived the long sea journey to land in Australia. From these and other purchases, Macarthur built up his flocks and sold the first bale of Australian wool in England in 1807 for 10 shillings, a good price in those days.

With the gold rushes of the 1850's, many shepherds left the fields to 'try their luck' at gold digging so those left had to look after up to 1,000 sheep each. The losses this caused encouraged the building of fences despite their cost and this was the beginning of the large farms, which, by the 1890's had stocks of over 100 million sheep. In 1895 there were over 40 sheep stations in NSW alone shearing more than 100,000 sheep annually with even larger properties in Queensland. This led to the need for large numbers of shearers, so they teamed up to work together and moved from shed to shed.

WASHING SHEEP 1823